A Fairly Sad Tale: A Play Based on the Life and Works of Dorothy Parker

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Many biographies have been written about Dorothy Parker, but she never wrote her own full autobiography. Parker presented a challenge to those who attempted to chronicle her, because she so often changed what she wrote or told others about herself. She created an image of who she wanted to be which was, to her, far more entertaining, interesting, and perhaps in a way more authentic than her actual experiences. Her short stories and poetry, however, are deeply autobiographical, particularly those chosen for this play. It is through them that we may get the most revealing portrait of Parker.

At the end of the Roaring Twenties and Thirties during Parker's formative social years, rampant hypocrisy prohibited writers, like those in the so called Algonquin Roundtable, from being honest about their activities. Parker, as a woman, was doubly shackled by convention. Alcohol was illegal, yet easy to get, and everyone in her set seemed to be indulging to the point of creating rampant alcoholism. Homosexuality and extramarital sex, and the inevitable abortions, could not be discussed, much less admitted to in writing. Writers could only allude, through euphemism, to their characters engaging in immoral activities. Publicly their fictional characters loved and suffered and found redemption for the private lives of their creators.

Dorothy Rothschild was born in 1893 to a well-to-do family. In many respects, she had a charming and privileged childhood. Her father, the son of Jewish immigrants was an opportunistic, self-made man. Their family summered at the Jersey Shore and lived in

Manhattan, where she developed a proprietary love for the city that nurtured her as a writer and a woman. When Dorothy was only five, her mother died—a death for which she irrationally blamed herself. As with all of her experiences, this one is reflected in her writing. Biographer Marion Meade writes, "Her short stories were understandably devoid of loving mothers…Many of her mothers are either dismissive or actively abusive to their children" (Meade, 386). Her father remarried a woman the Rothschild children despised. She died suddenly in 1903, and Dorothy again blamed herself for so often wishing her step-mother dead. She then ferociously devoted her love to her father, siblings, and the numerous family dogs. In 1911, a series of shocking deaths, including one relative on the *Titanic*, triggered a decline in the health of her beloved father, with whom she now shared an apartment in New York. His death in 1913 left Dorothy forever certain that she was destined to be abandoned by everyone she loved. This theme will recur in Parker's writing for the rest of her life.

Now alone and broke in Manhattan, Dorothy provided for herself by playing piano in dancehalls while she persistently submitted her writing to newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. Finally, in 1914, *Vanity Fair* accepted one of her poems. Through Dorothy's *chutzpah* she was able to parlay this into a full time job at *Vogue*, writing captions for ads and illustrations for the handsome sum of ten dollars a week (Meade 713). She regularly used her platform to direct her biting wit at the female readers and her own employer. But, she knew she was destined for greater things and continued to march her writing upstairs to *Vanity Fair*, hoping for a permanent move.

While on vacation in 1916, Dorothy met Edwin Parker. He was handsome, funny, rich, and an alcoholic. Although Dorothy did not herself imbibe, she seemed to find his drinking charming. They married in 1917, but their honeymoon was cut short when he enlisted in the

army ambulance corps. He seldom wrote, and was rarely able to visit her; when he did their reunions were contentious and spoiled by Parker's drunken rages. In 1918, he was sent to France, and Dorothy was again alone (Meade, 970).

Dorothy filled her days and nights writing and cultivating lifelong friends, including Robert Benchley and Alexander Woollcott. Her persistent pestering paid off with a job as a theatre critic for *Vanity Fair*, where her witty writing began to attract attention. In 1920, she and other literati began to gather at the Algonquin Hotel, which catered to the raucous, ever growing, largely penniless mob of pseudo celebrities. At times, their rotating group contained Tallulah Bankhead, George Kaufman, Harpo Marx, Edna Ferber, and others, with guest visitations by notables like Noel Coward, Ring Lardner, and even F. Scot Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda.

When the war ended, Edwin Parker had returned home with a morphine addiction, his looks ruined and his nerves frayed. He became the butt of Dorothy's jokes to her cosmopolitan friends. At some point in the early 1920's, Dorothy finally took up drinking with her husband's encouragement. After trying various concoctions, she settled on Scotch, and it became her custom to drink small sips throughout the day. Fueled by liquor, she and Edwin began to fight, sometimes to the point of bruises and black eyes for Dorothy. Stories of failed marriages and domestic abuse began to pepper her work (Meade 1788).

Near the end of her marriage, Dorothy started an affair with a handsome newspaper man named Charles MacArthur, who was also married. Dorothy had flippantly carried on countless sexual affairs, but this time she was in love. Her conflicted passion was reflected in stories and poems that portray the image of a woman who is weak, pessimistic, besotted, and enslaved by her own feelings. She became pregnant, and was compelled to have an abortion. Dorothy was

overheard to say, “It served her right for putting all of her eggs into one bastard.” She also called MacArthur a Judas, for giving her thirty dollars toward the abortion (Meade 1981).

Dorothy wanted children and was haunted by images of the fetus. Her behavior indicates that she fell into a depression—the first of many episodes. She began to explore suicide and discuss it with her bridge partners. In January of 1923, she attempted to commit suicide by using one of the razors Eddie had left behind in their apartment—however she had called for room service first. According to biographer Barry Day, there were at least half a dozen recorded suicide attempts during her life. She regularly washed down sleeping pills with Scotch. It is unclear whether these were serious endeavors or cries for help. On one occasion, in desperation, she drank shoe polish (Meade 3885). At any rate, she did not waste the attempt to make light of her suicides and draw attention to herself, even from her hospital bed (Day 1326-1330).

Mr. and Mrs. Parker attempted to reconcile, and Charles MacArthur went back to his wife. Dorothy’s mood fluctuated, her drinking increased, and she supplanted Edwin with a string of rich, young, athletic, beautiful lovers. She was writing prodigiously and seemed to have settled into an uneasy truce with herself as an artist. Dorothy and her friends and lovers regularly traveled to Europe, occasionally in the company of Ernest Hemmingway. She finally separated from Edwin, at least geographically. They stayed legally married until 1928, but she kept his last name. They never saw each other again, and Edwin would die, possibly of a barbiturate overdose, only five years later (Meade 2620).

Just after Dorothy turned forty, she met her next husband, a bit part actor and would-be writer, named Alan Campbell. He had the All American good looks she prized, and he was twenty-nine. Although they made an unlikely pair, by all accounts they seemed to be legitimately

in love. He tolerated her moods and drunken hazes. He handled her business affairs and made sure that she met her writing deadlines. The suspicion that he was gay or bi-sexual haunted him, and was fair game for Dorothy's sharp tongue, but he shrugged off her innuendoes. The pair was offered a job writing for Paramount Studios in Hollywood. Dorothy thought the work was beneath her, but the steady income helped them to pay down her monumental debts. She and Alan received an Oscar nomination, they bought a farmhouse in Pennsylvania, and Dorothy was pregnant, at the age of forty-three. Unfortunately, she miscarried, and tried to get pregnant again, but could not carry a baby to term. Doctors determined that she suffered from fibroid cysts, and she underwent a hysterectomy. The stress caused their relationship to deteriorate, and Dorothy started picking on him incessantly for his shortcomings (Meade 4917-5553).

In 1942, Campbell decided to enlist in the army. It must have reminded Dorothy of her first husband, but this time, Dorothy was no ingénue in the bloom of youth. She was a bitter, plump, middle-aged woman who was now separated from the only person who could actually make her write. Alan enjoyed being with the other recruits; he and Dorothy grew more distant. Friends reported that Alan had even begun to hit her. History was repeating itself. Dorothy's estranged Roundtable friends were now all dead, dying, or ill—the price of years of self-abuse. Alan was shipped off to Paris, where he began an affair with a married woman. They divorced upon his return to the States.

Dorothy took a lover again—young, stupid, and handsome. Friends likened him to Li'l Abner (Meade 6100). Her career was faltering. Her health was failing, and she was in constant pain. Her lover left her for another woman, and stole valuable property from her. Mysteriously, she re-married Alan Campbell three months later in 1950 (Meade 6257). They were rehired as a

writing team, and set about to make a new life. By 1951, they were separated, and Dorothy returned to New York, where she received steady writing offers (6371).

In 1961, Alan Campbell asked his ex-wife to join him again in Hollywood. They lived in a tiny bungalow on a street inhabited by other actors and writers. It was a time of surprising peace, and they set to the task of writing a movie for Marilyn Monroe…unaware that she was soon going to be dead. By 1963, they were back to their old habits of drinking and fighting. Dorothy came home one day to find him in rigor mortis with a plastic bag on his head and Seconol capsules scattered around. He still had a cigarette clutched in his fingers (Meade 7217). Dorothy's friends brought her back to her beloved New York.

In 1964, Dorothy moved into a hotel, where she had always preferred to live. She could write only with great difficulty, and had begun to fall—not always from drinking. She recovered from Alan's death enough to visit old friends and make some new ones. Where men had in her youth been her solace, now a succession of female friends took her out, saw that she ate, paid her bills, and even gave her cab fare. As she prepared her final affairs, she left her money to the NAACP, to further the cause of civil rights. She died in 1967 and was cremated. Because she left no instructions for the disposal of her ashes, they sat in her agent's filing cabinet until 1988, when they were claimed by the NAACP (Meade 7561).

Dorothy Parker has two Oscar nominations, an O. Henry award, numerous poetry collections, plays, and short stories. She hobnobbed with some of the most famous literary figures and celebrities of the Twentieth century, and was a civil rights activist before such a thing was fashionable. Yet, today, her name is not academically remembered in the same breath with Hemmingway, Kaufman, and Fitzgerald. Nor should she be. It is true that Parker was a good

writer, but to the general public, she was more famous for being famous. She was immortalized for her witty quips, perpetual ennui, and bed hopping. This cult of personality paved the way for a post-modern generation of self-promoting, outspoken female artists who include Eric Jong, Camille Paglia, Madonna, and Lady Gaga. Although she wanted desperately to be a great writer, ultimately she sought to please herself and damn the consequences.

If I don't drive around the park,

I'm pretty sure to make my mark.

If I'm in bed each night by ten,

I may get back my looks again.

If I abstain from fun and such,

I'll probably amount to much;

But I shall stay the way I am,

Because I do not give a damn.

"Observation" from *Enough Rope* by Dorothy Parker

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A Fairly Sad Tale: A Play Based on the Life and Works of Dorothy Parker

This play is an amalgamation of Dorothy Parker's writings, her "Parkerisms," autobiographical and biographical information, combined with creative imaginings by the play's author when necessary to advance the artistic structure of the work. Some of the language has been altered or updated to fit the medium of the stage. The play is not an attempt to present a linear autobiography of Parker, but instead to reflect abiding primary emotions and timeless scenarios familiar in her time and ours.

Larger sources include:

"A Telephone Call"

"Arrangement in Black and White"

"The Dark Girl's Rhyme"

"Chant for Dark Hours."

"Resume"

"Big Blonde"

A typical room at the Algonquin hotel

Dorothy Parker suite at the Algonquin hotel

Vacationidea.com

Bar at the Algonquin Hotel

www.raulpop.com